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—**Fr. Kevin O'Neil, CSsR**, staff member at the San Alfonso
Retreat Center, Long Branch, NJ; and coauthor of

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Finding Our Way to God

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION
and the MORAL LIFE

IN THE SPIRIT OF ST. ALPHONSUS DE LIGUORI

Dennis J. Billy, CSsR

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*To the faculty, staff, alumni, and students
of the Alphonsian Academy in Rome*

*But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle,
willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits,
without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.
And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace
for those who make peace.*

JAMES 3:17-18

*My Jesus, my Jesus, I desire nothing of you but yourself.
Now that you have drawn me to your love, I leave all,
I renounce all, and I bind myself to you.
You alone are sufficient for me.*

ST. ALPHONSUS DE LIGUORI

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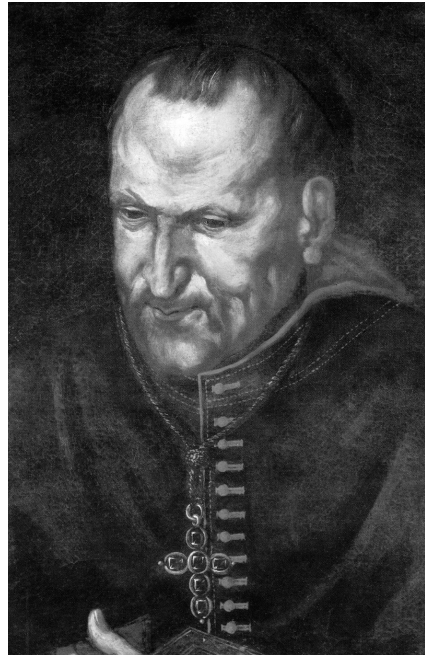
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Foreword

Saint Alphonsus de Liguori, the founder of the Redemptorist missionary congregation and an extended apostolic family, dedicated his life to the care of souls. Everything he did—from his heartfelt preaching and intense missionary activity to his balanced confessional practice and gentle direction of souls, from his vast theological writings and moving poetry to his inspirational music and engaging artwork, and, most especially, to his deep life of prayer and pious devotion—was done out of an intense desire to help people find their way to God. A man of his times, through his personal encounter with Jesus Christ, his beloved Redeemer, Alphonsus tapped into the perennial values of the gospel message and made them come alive for the people of his day.

Alphonsus' pastoral zeal and spiritual insight into the love of Jesus Christ led him to focus on one of Christianity's most basic principles: that we find our way to God by recognizing that God has anticipated our deepest yearnings and already found his way to us. We see this happening when we look at life through the eyes of faith and become serious about the life of prayer. Authentic prayer presupposes faith and helps us to find our



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tion,” precisely because it immersed us through faith in the great narrative of Christ’s redemptive journey.

Crib. Cross. Sacrament. Mary. These four pillars of Alphonsus’ gospel spirituality testify to God’s impassioned, “crazy love” for humanity, which led him to enter our world, give himself completely, to the point of dying for us, become nourishment for us, and remain a lasting source of hope. The motto he gave to his missionary family, “*Copiosa apud eum redemptio*” (“With him is great power to redeem” Psalm 130:7), reminds us that the fullness of life comes in and through the person of Jesus Christ, who is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

Saint John Paul II once called Alphonsus “a gigantic figure, not only in the history of the Church but for the whole of humanity as well.” He also referred to him as “the teacher of the Catholic soul of the West” and claimed that he “did for Catholicism that which Augustine accomplished in ancient times.” These words remind us of the great impact of Alphonsus’ moral and spiritual writings on Catholic believers and that his missionary zeal and spiritual legacy continue to influence them to this day.

As with any historical figure, however, Alphonsus’ insights into the Christian moral and spiritual life need to be broken open, chewed, digested, and interpreted in the light of the problems and circumstances facing today’s believers. Otherwise, his thought, rooted as it is in the distant societal and cultural milieu of eighteenth-century Bourbon Naples, would be difficult to access and perhaps even seem irrelevant to the mindset and sensitivities of the world today. For this reason, we welcome Fr. Dennis Billy’s creative and insightful adaptation of Alphonsus’ approach to mental prayer to the dynamics of spiritual direction.

The ministry of spiritual direction has made great strides in the past fifty years, not the least of which is that it has involved the laity to a much greater degree than ever before and has become a concern not only for Catholics but also for members of other philosophical, religious, and ethical traditions. Fr. Billy has focused on a particular aspect of St. Alphonsus’ thought (his approach to mental prayer) and shown how it can serve as a useful model for the care of souls. In doing so, he uses the Alphonsian tradition in a way that is both continuous with the past and relevant to the situations of those seeking spiri-

tual guidance in the early decades of the third millennium.

In his own day, Alphonsus was someone who sought to take the vast trea-

asures of the Church's spiritual tradition out of the rarified domain of privileged elites and bring them to everyday believers, especially the poor and marginalized. Using St. Alphonsus for his inspiration, Fr. Billy has given us an approach to spiritual direction that is simple, practical, heartfelt, easy to learn, and rooted in resolute action. He is also very modest in his claims, presenting this approach as only one of many tools to which spiritual directors can have recourse in conducting their ministries. I commend Fr. Billy for his hard work in this area and thank him for his translation of the Alphonsian tradition in a meaningful and relevant way for today's spiritual directors. I also thank the Templeton World Charity Foundation for the grant that has given him the time and support to make this work possible. May the fruit of his labors reap great benefits for many.

Michael Brehl, CSSR
Superior General
Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer

Preface

I have been a member of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (the Redemptorists) for more than forty years and have tried my best to immerse myself in the writings of its founder, St. Alphonsus de Liguori (1696-1787). This was no easy task, especially since he was a prolific author, with more than 100 published works and thousands of letters penned by his hand. He was one of the most renowned moral and spiritual theologians of his day and widely read throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.

His influence continues to this day. Saint John Paul II called Alphonsus "...a saint who was a master of wisdom for his time, and who continues to enlighten the path of the people of God with the example of his life and teaching, as a light reflecting Christ, the light of the nations."¹ According to Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI: "To pastors of souls and to confessors, Alphonsus recommended faithfulness to Catholic moral doctrine, accompanied by a comprehensive and gentle attitude so that penitents could feel accompanied, supported, and encouraged in their journey of faith and Christian life."² Spiritual wisdom, enlightening the path of God's people, gentle and comprehensive accompaniment in the faith: these are some of the hallmarks of Alphonsus' approach to the care of souls. These same marks also have great relevance for the ministry of spiritual direction as it is practiced today.

This book is an attempt to highlight the relevance of Alphonsian spirituality for the ministry of spiritual direction and the moral life. It does so not by simply restating the thought of this great doctor of the Church but by adapting it to our present sensitivities. It focuses not on what Alphonsus himself taught about spiritual direction (his insights could well comprise a book in its own right) but instead uses his simple approach to mental prayer as the basis for understanding the underlying dynamics of the process of direction itself. In doing so, it takes to heart Jesus' words to his disciples: "...every scribe who has

been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matthew 13:52).

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Interpreting Alphonsus in this way opens up many possibilities for the ministry of spiritual direction. For one thing, it offers a simple, easy-to-learn, and practical way of understanding the direction process—one that can be used in a variety of contexts to meet the spiritual and moral needs of today's world. For another, it draws a close connection between spirituality and morality, between the ministry of spiritual direction itself and the moral life, thus providing an integrated approach to life that sees an intimate relationship between holiness and wholeness, between spiritual experience and moral action in the world. It also offers a way of adapting the model to members of other religious, philosophical, and ethical traditions so they can benefit from this approach to direction without sacrificing the values embedded in their own traditions.

The patron saint of confessors and moral theologians, St. Alphonsus was also known as a great doctor of prayer. In his writings he embraced a balanced view of the moral and spiritual life that steered a delicate and hard-fought *via media* in the midst of controverted and heated extremes. A highly focused and practical author, he used whatever means he could find to bring others closer to Christ. Throughout his works he stressed the importance of the search for practical wisdom through careful reasoning, prudential judgment, and heartfelt prayer.

This book seeks to infuse one particular aspect of Alphonsus' thought—his approach to mental prayer—into the practice of spiritual direction today. This approach is a new and valuable tool that spiritual directors can use to help others become themselves in their faith. May it assist both directors and those they serve to navigate the turbulent waters of the moral and spiritual journey.

Dennis J. Billy, CSsR

Feast of St. Alphonsus de Liguori

August 1, 2018

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Introduction

This book deals with the relationship between spiritual direction and the moral life. It comes out of the Catholic tradition, more specifically from the moral and spiritual mindset of St. Alphonsus de Liguori, doctor of the Church, patron saint of confessors and moral theologians, and the founder of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. It does not claim to be an exhaustive treatment of either spiritual direction or the moral life. Its purpose is to examine the relationship between the two and, in the spirit of Alphonsus, do so in a way that is simple, practical, pastoral, focused on the poor and marginalized, and easy to implement. It wishes to make sound spiritual direction accessible to as many people as possible and to offer it across boundaries that, more often than not, have kept people apart, rather than united. It is a practical primer for an approach to spiritual direction that looks to the future by reflecting on the past and learning how both impinge upon the decisions of the present.

A Biographical Sketch

Alphonsus de Liguori (1696-1787) was born into the lower nobility of the Kingdom of Naples, studied law at the University of Naples, and became a doctor of both civil and canon law (*doctor utriusque juris*) by the age of sixteen. He practiced law for roughly ten years before deciding to become a priest. He was ordained a priest of the Archdiocese of Naples in 1726 and soon gained a reputation for his preaching as a member of the Apostolic Missions and the Chinese College. Early on in his ministry he demonstrated a marked concern for the poor, as manifested in his work at the Hospital of the Incurabili and in organizing the outdoor evening chapels (*Cappelle Serotine*) conducted for the poor *lazzaroni* of the streets of Naples.

In 1731, Alphonsus founded the Congregation of the Most Holy Savior (later changed to Redeemer) in the town of Scala, situated along the Amalfi Coast.

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Coast. The work of this new apostolic institute was to preach the gospel to the poor and marginalized of the rural, mountaintop villages of southern Italy. After years of mission preaching in these abandoned outskirts, he was consecrated bishop of St. Agatha of the Goths in 1762, an office he would rather have avoided and which he accepted only in obedience to Pope Clement XIII. For the next thirteen years he served the people of his diocese with great dedication, focusing specifically on the formation of priests, the reform of the clergy, and the spiritual renewal of the people. In 1775, he was permitted to retire from his episcopal duties for health reasons.

Alphonsus was an accomplished artist, author, composer, letter writer, poet, and theologian. During his illustrious career, he published a total of 111 works mainly in the areas of moral and ascetical theology. Although a man of his times, his literary corpus reveals an integrated vision of the moral and spiritual life that carries great weight and continues to inspire. His most popular works include *Visits to the Blessed Sacrament* (1745), the four large tomes of his *Moral Theology* (1748), *The Glories of Mary* (1750), and *The Practice of the Confessor* (1755), *The Way of Salvation* (1766), and *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ* (1768).¹ Having suffered from poor health for many years, made worse by a crippling form of arthritis, he died among his Redemptorist community in Pagani, Italy, at the age of ninety-one. He is remembered for his tremendous zeal for the salvation of souls and is known throughout the Catholic world as “The Most Zealous Doctor” (*Doctor Zelantissimus*).

Alphonsian Spirituality

Alphonsus was considered one of the great moral theologians and spiritual writers of his day. He immerses us in a spirituality that seeks to pattern the lives of all believers after the Gospel narrative of Jesus’ Incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection. According to this narrative, Jesus entered our world in the mystery of the Incarnation, gave himself to us in his public ministry and the mystery in his passion and death, became nourishment for us in the mystery of the Eucharist, and remains a source of hope for us through the mystery of his resurrection. For Alphonsus, this narrative, once encountered, should evoke from us a similar response. Like Jesus, we are called to enter the world of those around us, give ourselves to them in a life of service, become nourishment for them, and a source of hope.

Alphonsus summarized the movement of this Gospel narrative in four key words: crib, cross, sacrament, and Mary, Liguori.org • 800-325-9521

who, according to Catholic belief, is the only person besides her Son who has experienced the fullness of the resurrected life.

Alphonsus' own spiritual journey reflects this basic Gospel narrative. At a decisive moment in his discernment to abandon his legal career and, with it, all hopes of worldly gain, he knelt in prayer at an altar dedicated to Mary, Mother of Mercy, drew his sword, and laid it at her feet as a symbol of his firm resolve to leave everything and follow her Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. This image of a two-edged sword evokes those famous words in the Letter to the Hebrews: "Indeed, the word of God, is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides the soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (4:12).

For our purposes, this image provides us with a way of understanding Alphonsus' gospel spirituality. One edge of the sword represents a "spirituality of practice," which focuses on living out our faith with the fundamental values and attitudes of Jesus. The other edge of the sword may be likened to a "spirituality of heart," which focuses on lifting up one's mind and heart to God and revealing to him our deepest thoughts and feelings. These two edges come together at a single point in a "spirituality of mission," which focuses on spreading the good news of redemption to those around us. Alphonsus' spirituality, we might say, seeks to touch people's minds and hearts, bring about a radical conversion (*metanoia*) in their lives, and inspire them to share their experience with others.

For Alphonsus, spirituality and morality, contemplation and action, prayer and virtue have a single purpose: to immerse us in the values of the kingdom and, in doing so, facilitate its spread. His approach to mental prayer contains each of these elements of his understanding of the moral and spiritual life.

The Manner of Making Mental Prayer

Alphonsus simplified the manner of making mental prayer so that it could be easily learned and remembered. He believed it was meant not only for clergy and religious but for everyone. Among the three major types of prayer, it falls between vocal prayer (praying to God aloud either alone or with others) and contemplation (wordless prayer done in the silence of one's heart). It falls between these two categories for two reasons: Unlike contemplation, it actually

uses words when talking to God; unlike vocal prayer, it does not express them aloud but articulates them in the quiet of one's heart. According to Alphonsus,

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mental prayer was morally necessary for salvation. He liked to say, “If you pray, you will be saved; if you don’t pray, you will be damned.”² Rephrasing it in a way that might be more palatable to our present sensitivities, the statement would read something like: “If you pray, then you will eventually find your way to God; if you do not pray, then you will spend eternity wandering about aimlessly trying to fill a giant hole in your soul that, in the end, can only be filled by God.”

For Alphonsus, this saying applied first and foremost to mental prayer. Without it, he believed it would be very difficult to find one’s way to God. If you pray, you will be saved; if you don’t pray, you will end up wandering off the road that leads to God and be lost. The road to God is the moral life, the good life, the blessed life. Prayer, in other words, is the great means of salvation. It fosters our relationship with God, it makes us friends of God; and it empowers us through God’s grace, to live the fundamental commandments of the moral life given us by Christ himself: the love of God and the love of neighbor (Mark 12:29–31).

A Fourfold Plan

The book is divided into four parts with two appendices and a list of suggested readings, all of which attempt to approach the relationship between spiritual direction and the moral life by adapting Alphonsus’ simple approach to mental prayer to the dynamics of the direction process by focusing on virtue as the best way to integrate our spiritual and moral lives.

Part One, “Mooring in Spiritual Direction,” consists of four chapters and focuses on some of the general features of the direction process itself. It treats many basic questions concerning the process of direction as a whole and seeks to provide a firm foundation for all that follows. Part Two, “An Alphonsian Approach to Spiritual Direction,” covers another four chapters and demonstrates how Alphonsus’ approach to mental prayer can be adapted to the dynamics of the spiritual direction. It shows that the same movements used in opening our hearts and minds to God can be integrated into the process of direction itself. Part Three, “Spiritual Direction and the Moral Life,” offers five chapters on how the virtuous life and the gifts of the Spirit lie at the very heart of the direction process. It provides the theological basis for a further integration of spirituality, morality, and life in the Spirit. Part Four, “Dialoguing With Other Traditions,” devotes five chapters to examining how the Alphonsian

model of spiritual direction can be adapted to other religious, philosophical, and ethical traditions. It seeks to show that elements of the model can be used to help others become themselves in their faith. Appendix A provides various excerpts from St. Alphonsus' spiritual writings that can be used as material for meditation and as points of departure for spiritual direction. Appendix B offers a list of helpful Internet sources related to many relevant topics on spiritual direction and the moral life. The readings section has helpful resources for those wishing to further their study of the topics covered in the book.

Taken together, the four parts of this book and their related back matter show how the Alphonsian approach to spiritual direction can assist us in getting in touch with our deepest thoughts and feelings about the ultimate realities of life, bring them to the surface of our awareness, listen to them, share them with others, and resolve to do something about them. They also help us to recognize what people of varying backgrounds share in common and how they can use them to grow in respect and mutual understanding.

Conclusion

Some years ago, there was a debate about whether there was a single Christian spirituality or many.³ Are the many so-called Christian spiritualities nothing more than variations on the theme of Christian discipleship, or is each of them distinct in its own right and worthy of a separate designation? In a certain sense, both answers are correct. Down through the centuries, the one spirituality lived by Jesus of Nazareth has been assimilated by his followers and adapted to changing historical circumstances.

Today we speak of Augustinian, Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican, Carmelite, Ignatian, and Alphonsian spiritualities. We also speak of priestly, religious, and lay spiritualities, as well as separate spiritualities for men and women—and many others. All of these spiritualities are similar and dissimilar; distinct, yet also very much alike. They are all variations on the one gospel spirituality of Jesus Christ, who entered our world, gave himself completely to us, in order to become nourishment, and be a source of hope for us. The genius of Alphonsian spirituality is that it brings this underlying narrative to the fore and places it at the heart of the gospel proclamation.

Much the same can be said for spiritual direction. There are many models of spiritual direction: direct and indirect, sacramental and nonsacramental, Christian and non-Christian—to name but a few. The approach developed in

these pages does not claim to be the only approach to spiritual direction, nor does it purport to be necessarily the best. It simply wishes to propose an alternative approach that is simple, easy to learn, practical, and pastorally based. It also seeks to present a model that focuses specifically on integrating morality and spirituality in the life of the believer. Although the model presented in these pages stems from the Catholic tradition and specifically from the approach to mental prayer of St. Alphonsus de Liguori, it has much to offer those of other religious, philosophical, and ethical traditions. The hope is that it will be valued as such and used as just one of many tools that directors can turn to in their attempt to help others become themselves in their faith.

PART ONE

Moorings in Spiritual Direction

Part one offers a general overview of spiritual direction. It focuses on what it is (chapter one); its primary relationships (chapter two); its use of active listening (chapter three); and its prayerful search for wisdom (chapter four). By examining the essentials necessary for helping people to navigate the turbulent waters of life and become themselves in the faith, it hopes to shed light on what will help those seeking guidance to have a safe, yet adventurous journey to distant shores that beckon them and for which they yearn. By examining the essentials of this important ministry, it also shows how spiritual direction can become a place where the moral and spiritual dimensions of the Christian tradition can come together and find a home.

CHAPTER ONE

Spiritual Direction



*Make me know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God
of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.*

PSALM 25:4-5

As we begin our discussion of spiritual direction and the moral life, it is important for us to start with a common understanding of what the ministry is all about. Although most of us have probably heard of spiritual direction, it is quite possible that some of us, even those with much experience in pastoral care, do not have a clear idea of what it is or exactly what to expect from it. In this brief opening chapter, we will present the bare bones of this important ministry and with an emphasis on its primary focus.

What Is Spiritual Direction?

Spiritual direction (spiritual guidance or accompaniment, as it is also called) is a helping relationship that focuses on growth in our relationship with God. A person may seek out spiritual direction for any number of reasons: not knowing how to deal with sinfulness; being stuck in efforts to grow in holiness; examining relationships in the light of one's faith; wanting to draw closer to God

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through prayer; and discerning God's will in one's life, for example. Direction can be either *directive* or *nondirective* and normally involves a long-term relationship between the director and the person seeking guidance. In this relationship, the director looks upon himself or herself as a servant of the Holy Spirit, whom the Christian tradition consistently recognizes as the spiritual director par excellence.

When the director takes a prominent role in instructing us how to draw closer to God, spiritual direction is *directive*. The director, in such a scenario, *gives specific instructions* (directives) and uses the Scriptures and teachings of the great saints and spiritual masters of the Christian tradition as a kind of blueprint for growth in the Spirit. These directives can be general (pray more often, do more spiritual reading, be more charitable) or concrete (meditate every morning for thirty minutes, read *The Imitation of Christ*, volunteer a specific amount of time to a particular charity). Scrupulous people often need this kind of direction and actively seek it out.

When the director, by way of contrast, employs careful listening and honest personal feedback to help us *discover for ourselves* the next steps that we need to take on our journey, spiritual direction is *nondirective*. In this instance, the director seeks to be present to us and help us make sense of our relationship with God. In such a situation, he or she seems more like a spiritual friend or companion than a spiritual teacher or master. The director encourages us to open our hearts, look at what has been going on in our lives, and look for God in the dark places, as well as in the light. In time, we develop a relationship of trust with the director and gradually feel free to share with him or her our innermost secrets.

Over time, each spiritual director will develop a unique style of direction, sometimes incorporating elements of both the *directive* and *nondirective* approaches into something uniquely his or her own. It is worth noting that spiritual direction can also be adapted to a group setting. In such instances, the director becomes a kind of facilitator who pulls out common themes from a group discussion and encourages individual members to examine those themes in their lives.

The kind of direction employed in a given instance depends on any number of factors: the knowledge, skill, and availability of a competent director; the amount of time at his or her disposal; our own personality needs and temperament; and so forth. Directors should be acquainted with a variety of

approaches to spiritual direction, as well as the wealth of insights on growth in the spiritual life from the Christian tradition.

Before entering into a relationship of spiritual direction, a director normally meets with the person seeking guidance in order to discuss expectations regarding the specific kind of direction being offered, frequency of meetings, the length of the individual sessions, confidentiality, qualifications, and, when appropriate, even payment. It may be helpful to distribute beforehand a small informational pamphlet such as *What Is Spiritual Direction?* to serve as a point of departure for the discussion.¹ Periodic reviews of how the relationship has taken shape are also expected, as is close oversight by trained supervisors, to ensure that the process is not in some way being compromised.

Primary Focus

The primary focus of spiritual direction is our relationship with God. We become ourselves in the faith by bringing our ties to God consciously to the fore and reflecting on them in their most intimate details. Spiritual direction provides a place where this quiet process is brought into focus and honestly examined in the presence of another human being. It gives us the opportunity to look at our lives through the eyes of faith, and encourages us to invite God into our daily lives. In the words of the Apostle Paul, “We walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7).

A number of factors should always be kept in mind during spiritual direction: our understanding of ourselves, how we act toward others and the world in which we live, our relationship to God, and the quality of our prayer. During direction, we are not looking for an abstract knowledge of these important dimensions of the spiritual life but an experiential awareness of them. We examine both our thoughts about God and our feelings toward him. We look at our feelings of intimacy with him, as well as our experiences of distance and perhaps even estrangement from him. From such practical, existential knowledge, a number of important questions will come to the fore at some point in the direction process: How do we treat ourselves? How do we act toward others? How do we live in the world? How do we behave toward God? How do we pray?

Such questions touch essential dimensions of our relationship with God and must be given due consideration in the ongoing course of direction, although not necessarily with the same degree of intensity at every session.

Although every relationship (indeed, every session) of spiritual direction is unique, a number of common threads are often woven into the relationship over time.

Spiritual direction involves a relationship of giving and receiving that focuses on enabling us to delve more deeply into the mystery of God and to understand more clearly the ramifications of that experience in the concrete circumstances of our daily lives. As a helping relationship, it offers us the possibility of a grace-filled response to a faithful and loving God, who promises to enter into the process and to accompany both helper and the helped at every stage of their journey in faith.

Conclusion

The process of spiritual direction involves taking an honest look at the way we relate to God and to ponder its effect on our relationship with ourselves, others, and the world around us. Doing so enables us to better understand the various strengths and weaknesses in the manner we address God. Direction gives us the opportunity to examine every level of our relationship with God. Taking place against a contemplative backdrop of silence, it focuses on the thoughts, feelings, needs, and practical steps needed for us to draw closer to God. It can also help us to arrive at a better understanding of what it means to converse with God intimately with an open heart and to live the gospel on a deep level of awareness. In the next chapter, we will look at the various relationships at work in the process of spiritual direction and the manner in which they interact. See chapter seven for a detailed overview of a spiritual direction session.

Reflection Questions

How would you describe what spiritual direction is and how it differs from other helping relationships, such as counseling and therapy?

What is the purpose of spiritual direction?

What is the job of the spiritual director?

In what sense is spiritual direction a process?

Why is silence so important in spiritual direction?

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CHAPTER TWO

Relationships



*The virtuous soul that is alone and without a master,
is like a lone burning coal;
it will grow colder rather than hotter.*

ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS, SAYINGS OF LIGHT AND LOVE¹

Simply knowing about spiritual direction should not be enough to satisfy us. We must take many other insights into account to have an honest assessment of its value today. Numbered among them are certain relations that touch the very heart of the direction process. For instance, a helping relationship seeking to draw people closer to God should take place within an atmosphere of mutual trust and privileged respect. If it does, then those seeking spiritual guidance will come to a deeper awareness of God in their lives. If it does not, then the quality of the direction will suffer, sometimes to the point of damaging their relationship with God and others. This chapter explores five important relationships involved in spiritual direction and offers pertinent observations about their significance for the Christian moral and spiritual life.

I. The Person Seeking Guidance and God

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The primary focus of spiritual direction is the relationship between directees
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and God. That is not to say the other relations involved in direction are unimportant. Nor does it mean these other relations are never to be thought of as having priority in other areas. It only means they do not have priority of purpose in the helping relationship known as spiritual direction. People become themselves in the faith by bringing their relationship with God consciously to the fore and reflecting upon its most intimate details.² Spiritual direction focuses on this quiet revelatory process and allows people to examine their lives honestly in the presence of another.

When going to direction, those seeking guidance must keep in mind three interrelated factors: their understanding of themselves, their understanding of God, and their understanding of prayer. The word *understanding* refers here not to an abstract conceptualization of these important dimensions of the spiritual life but to an experiential, action-oriented awareness. From such practical knowledge, certain key questions arise during the direction process. A person seeking guidance needs to ask: “How do I treat myself? How do I behave toward God? How do I pray?” These questions touch essential dimensions in a person’s relationship with God. They must be given consideration in the ongoing course of direction, although not necessarily with the same intensity at every session.

These factors, however, only go so far when it comes to a person’s relationship with God, because each of them must be turned on its head and directed to God. With helpful aids of the imagination we can accompany those seeking guidance along a series of encounters with the God of Christian revelation. We must be willing to ask questions such as: “Who is God for you? What image comes to mind when you say the word? How does God speak to you? What does God want of you? What do you want of God?” Using the same imaginative process with the person before us, God will also be asked about his own understanding of himself, the directee, and how he speaks to him or her. Such questions are extremely important, because they underscore the mutuality of the relationship between the human and divine. Directees, in other words, are encouraged to explore not only their point of view concerning their self-image, God, and prayer but also the viewpoint of God himself. If the whole point of spiritual direction is to enable those seeking guidance to grow in the friendship of God, then the marks of friendship—benevolence, reciprocity, and mutual indwelling—must somewhere be in evidence. In other words, God’s action

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referred to), then spiritual direction becomes too one-sided in its contemplation of the individual's relationship to the divine.

II. The Director and God

In addition to the relationship between those seeking guidance and God, the one between director and God also comes into play. This relationship is not the primary focus of spiritual direction but it has an important effect on its success. The more we as directors nurture our relationship with God through appropriate means, the more will we be in a situation to help those seeking guidance. Such means would include: ongoing spiritual direction for ourselves; frequent recourse to the Church's liturgical and sacramental life; mature, solid friendships; and participation in the Christian community.

If we value spiritual direction so highly that we are willing to give it, we should also be willing to make the time and the effort to receive it. If we are not ourselves in the faith, how can we expect to help others to become so? Receiving spiritual direction should be an essential element of every director's life. In receiving it, we will be drawn more closely to God and be of more help to those seeking us for spiritual direction.

As directors, we should also have frequent recourse to the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church in order to deepen our relationship with God. Christ's redemption is mediated to us through these means. For this reason, the sacraments and the liturgy of the Church hold a primary place in nourishing the spiritual life of the believer. To neglect them is to close ourselves off to the primary areas in life where God enters our world and communes with us as "Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us'" (Matthew 1:23).

As directors, we also need the support of intimate friends for our psychological well-being and for our own development as mature human beings. Such friends not only actively seek our good and share with us an experience of mutual indwelling but also help us to understand our own relationship with God. By having close friends who are a special manifestation of God in our lives, we receive a deeper experiential basis with which to understand our own intimate relationship with God. Such a unique relationship will enable us to facilitate a similar deepening of faith in others.

Finally, as directors we must foster our relationship with God in the context of the body of Christ. Participation in the life of the Christian community is an essential precondition of our personal relationship to the Lord. We

are baptized into Christ's body, the Church, and called to live in service to the community to which we are called. This means keeping our primary community commitments (to family, to a religious congregation, to a parish) at the fore of our understanding of God's call.

By tending to our relationship with God through these appropriate means, we draw close to God in friendship and can thus be of service to those who come to us for direction. Directees are normally looking for someone with a personal knowledge of God who will be able to guide them in their journey toward God in friendship. This personal experience of God in our lives cannot be feigned. If we do not have it, then perhaps we should question our involvement in this important ministry.

III. Within God

The relations among the persons of the Trinity also must be taken into account in spiritual direction. Such an affirmation may at first seem rather bold for the likes of the ordinary, matter-of-fact dialogue that takes up much of the time spent in this important helping relationship. A closer look at the statement, however, reveals the extraordinary truth of the Christian faith: "God became man," Athanasius of Alexandria tells us, "so that man might become divine;"⁴ God has visited the human race in Jesus Christ and through his Spirit continues to inspire it by taking an active role in the helping relationship of spiritual direction. For this reason, an understanding of the primary relationships within the Godhead will also be of great help to directors.

One of the greatest contributions of the doctrine of the Trinity to the history of ideas is that it places the concept of "relation" within the very nature of God. The ungenerated Father, the generated Son, and the proceeding Spirit are distinct from one another by virtue of their differences in relationship, making the Godhead relational in its very essence. But since essence and being are identical in God, the contrary conclusion must also be true: the divinity is distinct by virtue of its oneness of being and one by virtue of its distinctive relationships. Such is the incomprehensible mystery of the relational God of the Christian faith, expressed so eloquently in the tradition by the simple term *Trinitas*.

To speak of the Trinity as relational is to emphasize the social character of the Godhead. The Christian God is a communion of love, one in being yet three in person: ungenerated in its Source (the Father), eternally generated in its